

# EXTERNALISM AND A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE OF EMPIRICAL FACTS

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I want to discuss the possibility of combining a so-called ‘externalist’ theory of empirical content, on which the contents of a person’s beliefs are determined in part by the nature of his extra-bodily environmental embedding, with a plausible account of self-knowledge, in particular, of a person’s knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs. A difficulty for this combination is thought to be that it leads to the availability of a kind non-empirical, a priori knowledge about the mind-independent physical world which is intuitively intolerable.<sup>1</sup> The inference which is held to create this difficulty can be put like this.

- (E1) I believe that p.
- (E2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that p, then  $\underline{x}$ ’s environmental embedding is thus-and-so.
- ∴ (E3) My environmental embedding is thus-and-so.

An example of this purportedly problematic inference might be the following.

- (w1) I believe that water is wet.
- (w2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that water is wet, then  $\underline{x}$ ’s environment contains (or did contain) water.

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<sup>1</sup>The particular formulation of the issue which I address here is due to Martin Davies (1997). Indeed, my thoughts in this area were initially stimulated by the opportunity to give a reply to an earlier version of his paper at a meeting of the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology in Barcelona during the summer of 1996. Paul Boghossian also presses the issue as a challenge to content externalism of the kind defined in the text below (1989, 1997).

∴ (w3) My environment contains (or did contain) water.

Note that the truth of the consequent of (w2) requires that  $x$ 's environment contains (or did contain) water, rather than any kind of 'twin-water', which is like water in all superficial respects but happens to have a different chemical composition - that is, it requires that  $x$ 's environment contains (or did contain) this stuff ( $H_2O$ ) as opposed to that stuff (XYZ) (Putnam, 1975). This is precisely the force of the relevant form of content externalism. So the conclusion states that my environment contains water, as opposed to twin-water. This is a contingent matter of empirical fact, though. Hence the prospect of my knowing it a priori, or without any kind of empirical investigation, certainly raises a prima facie problem.

## I

The proponent of this line of objection to combining an adequate account of self-knowledge with content externalism argues as follows. First, any adequate account of a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs entails that his knowledge of instances of (E1) is non-empirical: neither its acquisition nor its status as knowledge necessarily involves any specific empirical investigation. Second, content externalism entails that instances of (E2) can be derived from non-empirical philosophical reflection upon the necessary conditions upon determinate empirical belief possession. Third, therefore, the truth of content externalism - in the presence of an adequate account of self-knowledge - enables a person knowledgeably to derive instances of (E3), on the basis of the argument above, without any empirical investigation whatsoever. Fourth, such non-empirical knowledge of empirical facts is intuitively intolerable. Therefore, fifth, content externalism is incompatible with any adequate account of a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs. The reaction which is implicitly recommended by

advocates of this argument, of course, is to reject content externalism. Like many others, though (e.g. Putnam, 1975; Burge, 1979, 1986; Evans, 1982; Pettit and McDowell, 1986; McGinn, 1989; Davies, 1991, 1992; Peacocke, 1993), I explicitly endorse a version of this very view (forthcoming). On my account, a person's possession of certain demonstrative beliefs about particular mind-independent things and their properties essentially depends upon his standing in certain perceptual-attentional relations with those very things; and since I regard such perceptual demonstrative beliefs as the indispensable core of his system of empirical belief as a whole, and as the foundations, in a certain sense, of all of his empirical knowledge, my commitment to content externalism runs very deep.<sup>2</sup> So what alternative do I propose to the recommended reaction of rejecting it?

There are obviously a number of possibilities. The one which I shall eventually propose and defend is to reject the very first move of the objection set out above: I deny that a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs is non-empirical in any way in which it really would follow that he could thereby acquire intolerably non-empirical knowledge of the contingent facts about his own environmental embedding. Before developing this claim, I want briefly to survey the alternatives. First, it might be possible to argue that the content externalist is not committed to the a priori knowability of specific instances of (E2). Although he is committed by definition to the conceptual necessity of the claim that concepts of certain types are externally individuated, in a way which entails the possibility of establishing that claim by non-empirical reflection upon the necessary conditions upon determinate empirical belief possession, he may nevertheless deny that the question of which particular concepts instantiate these types can be settled without empirical investigation.<sup>3</sup> Second, it might also be possible to deny

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<sup>2</sup>These commitments are defended in my forthcoming book.

<sup>3</sup>Christopher Peacocke urged me to take account of this possibility in correspondence.

the third move above, according to which the truth of content externalism - in the presence of an adequate account of self-knowledge - enables a person knowledgeably to derive instances of (E3) without any empirical investigation. This is Martin Davies' response (1997), which I shall consider in some detail shortly. There are two further responses, which I shall simply mention and set aside without argument as, in my view, extremely unpromising. The first of these would be to insist, in extreme rationalist spirit, that there is no difficulty whatsoever in the idea of wholly non-empirical knowledge of empirical matters of fact. Against this, I just take it for granted that a person's acquisition of new empirical knowledge, about the contingent nature of his environmental embedding, without any perceptual or other empirical investigation whatsoever, by pure reflection, is unacceptable. The second unpromising response would be to claim that a person's self-ascriptions of beliefs are not, contrary to appearances, genuinely truth-evaluable statements, but rather non-truth-evaluable avowals of some kind (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 190-192; 1980, §§ 470-504; Malcolm, 1991). Thus, they are incapable of constituting the premises of an argument, as they are supposed to do in (E1) above, the first premise of the argument which is in turn supposed to cause trouble for content externalism. Against this, I simply deny it. Whatever their logical and epistemological peculiarities, self-ascriptions of beliefs are statements about a person, to the effect that he is in a certain condition, namely that of believing that p, say. They are determined as true or false by whether or not the subject is in exactly the same condition as determines the truth or falsity of the corresponding other-ascriptions: 'he believes that p', say, said of the subject of the self-ascription by someone else. Such self-ascriptions, like their corresponding other-ascriptions, are true if and only if the person in question - that is, the subject making the self-ascription, who is the object of the corresponding other-ascription - has the belief in question - in this case, that p.

Let me return, then, to the two more plausible alternatives identified above to my own preferred strategy for establishing the compatibility of self-knowledge and content externalism in the face of the present line of objection to this combination. The first of these denies that specific instances of (E2) are knowable a priori, whilst granting that content externalism itself is a priori true, by arguing that it is a matter of empirical investigation to which actual concepts this externalism applies. For the standard externalist examples are natural kind concepts. Yet knowledge that any given concept is a genuine natural kind concept requires knowledgeably ruling out the following two ways in which putative reference to natural kinds might fail, which is surely an empirical matter. First, what appears to be reference to a natural kind may fail to be so because the characteristic theoretical role associated with the putative kind in question is not in fact played by anything at all. ‘Phlogiston’ provides a familiar actual case of this type. There just is no kind of stuff which is released into the surrounding medium quickly by burning and slowly by rusting, and so on. These processes involve instead the absorption of oxygen from the atmosphere. So there is no such thing as phlogiston. Apparent reference to a natural kind by the use of that term is merely illusory, and therefore certainly not susceptible to externalist treatment. Call this the possibility of emptiness with respect to a given putative natural kind term. Second, the range of items to which a term is correctly applied may turn out to be quite heterogeneous at the relevant level of theoretical description involved in the discrimination and unification of natural kinds. ‘Jade’ provides a familiar actual example of this phenomenon; for it is correctly used of two quite different substances: jadeite, which is a silicate of sodium and aluminium; and nephrite, which is a silicate of lime and magnesia. In principle, cases of this general kind could clearly turn out to be far more wildly heterogeneous, sufficiently so to make quite implausible any attempt to think in terms of a single unified natural kind with a number of sub-varieties, as it may be correct to think that some water is H<sub>2</sub>O and some is D<sub>2</sub>O,

although both are sub-varieties of the single natural kind water, and not of the natural kind twin-water (XYZ). In the more extreme cases, again, what appears to be a natural kind term turns out, on empirical investigation, not to be so. Call this the possibility of heterogeneity.

Thus, it may be claimed, knowledge of any particular instance of (E2) depends upon knowledge that the relevant component concept of the content that p is a genuine natural kind concept, which in turn depends upon the empirical knowledge required to rule out the possibilities of emptiness and heterogeneity with respect to the term expressing that concept. So the argument from (E1) and (E2) to (E3) does not, after all, threaten to provide an untenable, because wholly non-empirical, source of any specific piece of empirical knowledge.

I think that the content externalist should not be overly impressed by this apparent resolution of the tension between his position and the possibility of a plausible account of self-knowledge. The way in which parallel issues arise in connection with perceptual demonstrative reference to particular mind-independent objects helps to bring out why. Consider, for example, the following instance of the argument (E1), (E2) ⊢ (E3).

- (d1) I believe that that ball will go into the pocket.
- (d2) If x believes that that ball will go into the pocket, then x's environment contains that ball.
- ∴ (d3) My environment contains that ball.

Of course, there is no threat that such an argument should constitute an untenably non-empirical source of empirical knowledge - that a particular ball exists in his environment - if the subject's attempted demonstrative reference fails. And there are at

least the following two ways in which this might come about. First, there may be no ball at all, or anything else for that matter, at the place in his environment where the subject takes there to be one: that is to say, he may be subject to some kind of hallucination. Second, his thinking may fail to be responsive to the behaviour of a single ball, as he fails, for example, to keep track of the movement of a single red ball after a very strong break in a game of snooker. In the absence of any such defeating abnormality, though, the argument is perfectly sound; and neither his successful demonstrative reference to the particular ball in question, nor his knowledge of the particular instance of (E2) - that is, his knowledge of (d2) above - depends upon his having carried out any prior, or independent, empirical investigation to rule out all the possible sources of hallucination, unnoticed substitution of one ball by another, failure of attentional tracking, and so on.

Similarly, I contend, in the case of reference to natural kinds. According to the most natural development of the externalist position, understanding of natural kind terms is, in the most basic cases, acquired by some kind of demonstrative identification of the kind in question, as 'that stuff', on the basis, either of perception of its instances, or of testimony as to their distinguishing perceptible features, characteristic behaviour, normal function or whatever - or, more likely, on the basis of some combination of these. The possibilities of emptiness and heterogeneity with respect to putative natural kind terms therefore arise as follows. In the first case, the theoretically supported perceptual and/or testimonial appearance of an underlying kind is entirely hallucinatory. In the second case, the attempted demonstrative identification fails sufficiently to keep track of any single kind. Either way, the relevant instance of the argument (E1), (E2) |- (E3) is therefore harmless to the content-externalist. Nevertheless, in the normal case, when the demonstrative identification crucial to the subject's understanding of the term in question makes successful reference to a genuine natural kind, neither this, nor his knowledge of the corresponding specific instance of (E2), depends upon the subject's having carried

out any prior, or independent, empirical investigation to rule out all the possible sources of such error due to emptiness or heterogeneity. Thus, the relevant instance of (E1), (E2) | (E3) is back in contention as a threat to content externalism, in conjunction with which it appears to provide an untenably non-empirical source of empirical knowledge. In any case, the present attempt to avoid this difficulty for combining content externalism with a plausible account of self-knowledge is unsuccessful.

The second prima facie promising alternative to my own account of how content externalism and self-knowledge are correctly to be combined is to appeal to Davies' (1997) claim that, regardless of the validity of the argument from (E1) and (E2) to (E3), of a person's knowledge of instances of its two premises, and, indeed, of his knowledge of the validity of the relevant form of argument itself, knowledge of instances of its conclusion cannot be acquired by these means. For this would be in contravention of the following Limitation Principle.

(LP) Epistemic warrant cannot be transferred from A to B, even given an a priori known entailment from A to B, if the truth of proposition B is a precondition of the knower being able to believe the proposition A.

The only motivation which he offers for this principle is that it is supposed to save him from precisely the present difficulty with reconciling self-knowledge and externalism; and it looks a little bit like the following principle which he reads into Wittgenstein's On Certainty (1975).

(WP) Epistemic warrant cannot be transferred from A to B, even given an a priori known entailment from A to B, if the truth of proposition B is a precondition of the warrant for A counting as a warrant.



I think that neither is what Wittgenstein has in mind. More importantly, neither is remotely plausible in my view: (LP) even less so than (WP). Two kinds of counterexample to (LP) come immediately to mind. First, consider the following inference.

- (M1)  $r_1$  and  $r_2$  are real numbers
- (M2) The product of any two real numbers is a real number
- $\therefore$  (M3)  $r_1 r_2$  is a real number

Its conclusion is a necessary truth, which is therefore, presumably, a precondition of anything possible. Hence it is certainly a precondition of a person's believing the premises (M1) and (M2). So it follows from (LP) that epistemic warrant cannot be transferred from (M1) and (M2) to (M3). Generalizing the case, (LP) has the consequence that inferential knowledge of any necessary truth is impossible, which certainly places logic, mathematics, and, on many conceptions, philosophy, in a very poor position epistemologically speaking. Something must have gone badly wrong with (LP).

Second, there are clearly certain empirical preconditions upon the actual thought of humans. Suppose that 'Ax' is some such condition, for any human thinker, x. Now, it is surely possible for a person, b, to acquire inferential knowledge that Ab, on the basis of her observation of various scientific instruments along with her knowledge of the significance of their readings, say. Yet the truth of Ab is a precondition of her being able to think, and so believe, anything. Hence, trivially, it is a precondition of her being able to believe the premises of this inference. So (LP) entails that no such knowledge is possible. Again, this is clearly unacceptable. Thus, it seems to me that appeal to (LP) is a wildly implausible and quite ad hoc avoidance tactic in the present context.

### III

The key to my own strategy for reconciling self-knowledge with content externalism lies in the idea that true content externalist requirements are a consequence of the following version of Russell's Principle of Acquaintance (1917, p. 159), which I shall call (A).

(A) A person's capacity to make determinate reference to certain objects and kinds in belief depends upon his having demonstratively-based knowledge about them.

This is what makes it the case that his possession of such beliefs depends upon his being embedded in an environment actually containing the objects and kinds in question. What does this acquaintance condition amount to, though? Well, a person has demonstratively-based knowledge about a given object or kind if and only if, either, he has knowledge expressible using demonstrative reference to that object or kind, or, he had such knowledge, some of which is retained, perhaps linguistically categorized and no longer demonstratively expressible, in memory.

Establishing this principle (A) obviously requires extended argument, of which I can only give a brief sketch here.<sup>4</sup> The crucial claim is that externalist relations are necessarily reason-giving relations, constituting a source of demonstratively expressible knowledge; where by this I mean reason-giving from the subject's point of view, rather than from the perspective of some external theorist. Let me explain why I endorse this.

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<sup>4</sup>The argument is developed in detail, given extended illustration, and defended against putative counterexamples in ch. 3 of my forthcoming book.

The externalist holds that certain empirical beliefs have their contents determined in part by the subject's relations with particular things in his environment, the causal relations, for example, in which he stands to such things - to that object, say, or (instances of) that natural kind - when he is perceiving them, being informed about them by others, remembering them, and so on. Call these his causal-perceptual relations with the external worldly things in question. These causal-perceptual relations contribute essentially to the determination of objective truth-conditions for the relevant empirical beliefs about such things, which is what makes them genuinely beliefs about mind-independent reality, beliefs, that is to say, about just that object, say, or that natural kind. Now, suppose that these content-determining causal-perceptual relations are not reason-giving relations. It follows that for any pair of empirical contents, x and y, a person's causal-perceptual relations with the things in the world around him give him no more reason to believe that x than to believe that y, and vice versa. Consider, then, a person, S, who believes that p, where this is supposed to be an empirical belief, with externalistically determined content, about how things are in the mind-independent world around him. Since his causal-perceptual relations with certain such things play an essential role in the determination of the contents of his empirical beliefs, on the externalist's account, there is a range of alternative such beliefs - beliefs which he might have had instead - whose difference in content with his actual belief that p would have been due entirely to his standing in the relevant content-determining causal-perceptual relations with different mind-independent things. Suppose that the belief that q is one of these.

So, the situation is this. S actually believes that p, because his actual environmental embedding determines this, as opposed to q, as the empirical content of his belief, through its causal-perceptual impact upon him. He does not believe that q. Had his environmental embedding been appropriately different, though, his position would have been precisely the reverse: he would have believed that q, and not believed that p.

Yet, by hypothesis, the relevant content-determining causal-perceptual relations in which he stands to the actual things in the world around him are not reason-giving relations. So these give him no more reason to believe that *p* than to believe that *q*. Thus, he has, and could have, no reason whatsoever to believe that *p* rather than that *q*, or vice versa. For, recall, nothing other than his causal-perceptual relations with certain things in the world around him decides between the two contents - this is how *q* was introduced. Which of the two beliefs he actually has is due entirely to the contents of the environment in which he finds himself. Any supposed difference between believing that *p* and believing that *q* is therefore nothing to him; for there could be no reason for him to decide between them. So he does not really understand them as alternatives. Believing that *p* and believing that *q* are identical for him. Hence the supposedly content-determining role of *S*'s environmental embedding is empty. For there is nothing more, or less, to the content of a belief than the way the subject takes the world to be. Thus, if the proposed causal-perceptual relations in which a person stands to certain mind-independent things are not reason-giving relations, then they contribute nothing to the determination of specific worldly truth-conditions for his empirical beliefs about such things. In other words, the content-determining relations between a person and certain things in the world around him which are posited by the content externalist are necessarily reason-giving relations.

The argument here can obviously be generalized in two ways. First, the content *q* might be replaced throughout with any other content from the relevant range of alternatives to *p*, whose differentiation from *p* is likewise supposed to be due entirely to the subject's standing in the relevant content-determining relations with different possible, but non-actual, external environments. Second, *S*'s initial belief that *p* might be replaced by any other empirical belief, of any other person, whose content is supposed to be partially determined in externalist fashion by the subject's causal-perceptual relations with mind-independent things. The result of these generalizations is this. However the

putative content-determining causal-perceptual relations are conceived, insofar as these are supposed not to be reason-giving relations, they contribute nothing to the determination of specific worldly truth-conditions for the empirical beliefs in question. Thus, only reason-giving causal-perceptual relations with the external environment could possibly serve the content-determining role required by the content externalist.

The form of this argument is that of what Peacocke calls ‘the switching tactic’ (1988, pp. 475 ff).<sup>5</sup> A more familiar historical paradigm is provided by Strawson’s (1959, ch. 3; 1966, pt. III, sect. II, esp. pp. 168 ff; and 1974) reading of Kant’s (1929, A341/B399 ff) argument against Descartes’ (1986, pp. 107 ff) substance dualism. According to this Kantian argument, substance dualism entails the coherence of a distinction between qualitative and numerical identity for immaterial souls; yet the dualist’s own conception of such things, as exhaustively characterized by what is infallibly given to their own subjective point of view, denies her the resources to give any genuine content to the idea of two qualitatively identical but numerically distinct souls. So, the substance dualist depends upon a distinction - between qualitative and numerical identity for immaterial souls - which she is, by her own lights, incapable of making. Thus, the position is internally inconsistent.

Similarly, here, we are to consider a theorist who insists that the non-reason-giving causal-perceptual relations in which a person’s stands to certain objects or kinds in his worldly environment are essential to the determination of specific contents for his empirical beliefs. Such a theorist is therefore committed to the existence of pairs of beliefs with genuinely distinct contents, the distinction between which is entirely due to their subjects’ standing in the relevant causal-perceptual relations with different possible

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<sup>5</sup>So-called, I presume, because the tactic is to object to a theory on the grounds that it is in principle incapable of giving any significance to switches which are by that theory’s own lights crucial.

objects or kinds. Given his own conception of the nature of these content-determining relations, though, as non-reason-giving relations, this entails an overall conception of belief content which countenances the following situation. A person believes that p, and does not believe that q, even though he has, and could have, no more reason to believe that p than to believe that q and vice versa, that is, no reason to believe that p as opposed to believing that q or vice versa. It follows from this that the theorist in question is committed to a conception of belief content which is more discriminating than the subject's own understanding of the contents of his beliefs. For the theorist is obliged to distinguish p and q, even in the face of the fact that they are absolutely on a par as far as the subject's actual or possible reasons for, or against, endorsing them in belief are concerned. In other words, he is obliged to distinguish between these contents even though it is necessarily irrational for the subject, given full understanding of both of them, ever, even in principle, to take different attitudes towards them, that is, as Evans puts it (1982, p. 19), by accepting (rejecting) one while rejecting (accepting), or being agnostic about, the other. Thus, the purported distinction between p and q outstrips anything which is involved in the subject's understanding of these contents. This is surely unacceptable by anybody's standards. For the content of a belief is precisely, no more and no less than, the way the subject takes things to be. Hence the position under consideration is incoherent. It entails a distinction which, by its own lights, it is incapable of making.

So, if a person's causal-perceptual relations with mind-independent objects and kinds are to contribute essentially to the determination of the empirical contents of his beliefs, then his standing in these relations must provide the subject with reasons for such beliefs: beliefs, that is to say, about just that object, or that kind. These content-determining causal-perceptual relations therefore constitute a source of demonstratively expressible knowledge about these objects and kinds: the very objects and kinds which

are the semantic values of the relevant externalist concepts. Hence the source of externalist conditions upon determinate empirical belief possession is indeed my version of Russell's Principle of Acquaintance, (A) above. The requirement upon possession of empirical beliefs with certain contents that the subject should be in an environment actually containing certain things is derived from the fact that his possession of such beliefs depends upon his actually standing in certain basic reason-giving relations with such things.

Furthermore, I think that considerations from a rather different area lend additional support to (A). Recall, first, Evans' comments about a person's use of the proper name 'Louis' in the course of his discussion of the causal theory of names (1985a).

A group of people are having a conversation in a pub, about a certain Louis of whom S has never heard before. S becomes interested and asks: 'What did Louis do then?' There seems to be no question but that S denotes a particular man and asks about him. Or on some subsequent occasion S may use the name to offer a new thought to one of the participants: 'Louis was quite right to do that.' Again he clearly denotes whoever was the subject of the conversation in the pub. This is difficult to reconcile with the Description Theory [on which there is supposed to be associated with each name as used by a group of speakers who believe and intend that they are using the name with the same denotation a description or set of descriptions cullable from their beliefs which an item has to satisfy to be the bearer of that name] since the scraps of information which he picked up during the conversation might involve some distortion and fit someone else much better. Of course he has the description 'the man they were talking about' but the theory has no explanation for the impossibility of its being outweighed.

The Causal Theory [on which it is sufficient for someone to denote x on a particular occasion with a name, that this use of the name on that occasion be a causal consequence of his exposure to other speakers using the expression to denote x] can secure the right answer in such a case but I think deeper reflection

will reveal that it too involves a refusal to recognize the [Wittgensteinian] insight about contextual definition [that for an item to be the object of some psychological state of yours may be simply for you to be placed in a context which relates you to that thing] .... For the theory has the following consequence: that at any future time, no matter how remote or forgotten the conversation, no matter how alien the subject matter and confused the speaker, S will denote one particular Frenchman - Perhaps Louis XIII - so long as there is a causal connection between his use at that time and the long distant conversation. (pp. 6-7)

Evans has two important points here: first, that possession of a uniquely identifying definite description is unnecessary for successful singular reference; second, that the mere existence of a causal chain of 'reference-preserving' links back to the object in question, as these are conceived, for example, by Kripke (1980) and other proponents of the so-called 'causal theory of reference', is insufficient. Our intuitions about the 'Louis' case surely confirm both of these points. My hypothesis is that these intuitions are organized precisely by the existence of epistemic constraints upon genuine reference, that is, reference with real understanding on the subject's part. What makes S's context in the pub conversation sufficient for him to denote Louis XIII in this way, say, is that he is there, at that time and in the context of that conversation, in possession of some demonstratively-based knowledge about that man. His grasp of what is being said by those around him, and his understanding engagement in the discussion generally, provide him with knowledge expressible using demonstrative reference to the person in question.<sup>6</sup> Equally, I contend, what denies his later uses of any such significance, in the

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<sup>6</sup>I realize that I have said nothing about how exactly testimony might provide such direct demonstrative knowledge about the objects of discussion in certain circumstances. I believe that it does; and I would expect the correct account of this possibility to emerge from an investigation into the way in which what might be called testimonial demonstratives - as, for example, when S says 'that man was a villain' in the context of Evans' case of the pub conversation about Louis XIII - succeed in referring to particular persisting mind-independent objects. This would be very much in accord with the way in which I argue elsewhere that an account can be derived of the way in which perceptual experiences provide non-inferential reasons for empirical beliefs from reflection upon



circumstances which Evans describes, is that he then no longer retains anything of this knowledge in memory.

I am reasonably confident that this line of argument can be generalized. Here all that I can offer is a brief sketch of how this might be done. Assume that there is some genuine illumination to be had about the relation of reference - both to particular objects and to natural kinds - holding between certain referring expressions, as they are used in a given linguistic community, and the things which they denote, through reflection upon the practice of the radical interpreter in formulating a truth-theory for the language in which such expressions occur (see Davidson, 1984, esp. essays 3, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15 and 16; Evans and McDowell, 1976, intro; McDowell, 1977, 1978). As McDowell often insists (e.g. 1977, 1978), thinking in this way enables one to give a perfectly adequate account of the relations between thinkers and things which are required if the former are to refer to the latter in thought and talk, whilst resisting any supposed need reductively to formulate this account in terms of certain specific types of causal relations, or relations of any other kind, conceivable quite independently of their role in the intelligible engagement of a rational agent with the world around him. He puts the point like this.

It is not true that we condemn a truth-theory to floating in a void, if we reject the alleged obligation to fasten it directly to the causal realities of language-use by way of its axioms [that is, to give a reductive causal theory of reference]. On my account, those truth-theories that can serve as theories of sense are already anchored to the facts of language-use at the level of their theorems: the anchoring being effected by the requirement that assignments of truth-conditions are to be usable in specifications of content of intelligible speech-acts. Since the theorems must be derivable within the theory, the requirement bears indirectly on the

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perceptual demonstrative reference to mind-independent things (forthcoming, esp. ch. 6). The key moves of this latter derivation are set out very briefly below. See Evans (1982, chs. 5 & 9); Fricker (1987); Coady (1992); and McDowell (1994) for important work on the epistemology of testimony.

theory's deductive apparatus, including assignments of denotation; and the deductive apparatus needs no attachment to the extra-theoretical facts over and above what that affords. Thus we can acquire such understanding as we need of the deductive apparatus (in particular, of the denoting relation) by reversing the order of the theory's deductive direction, starting from our understanding of the requirement of serviceability in interpretation imposed on its consequences. We grasp what it is for a name to denote something by grasping the role played by the statement that it does in derivations of acceptable assignments of truth-conditions to sentences - assignments, that is, which would pull their weight in making sense of speakers of the language that we are concerned with. (1977, pp. 183-184.)

So, the idea is that the relations between a person, in his use of a referring expression, and the thing to which he refers in using it, in virtue of which the expression does indeed refer to that thing, are precisely those relations which compel an ideal radical interpreter, in her attempts to make best overall sense of what he says and does, to regard him as talking about that thing in using the expression in question. Furthermore, my contention is that this process of making sense of what people are thinking and talking about is constrained precisely by considerations of what they have knowledge about, most importantly, what it is about which they are provided with demonstratively expressible knowledge by the way in which their attention is focused upon the world in perception, testimony, memory and so on. That is, I claim that the relevant process of radical interpretation is governed by the question which things in the world around them the subjects to be interpreted have demonstratively-based knowledge about, given the relations in which they stand to such things in using the linguistic expressions which they use in the ways in which they do. In other words, there are, amongst the factors determining the interpreter's assignment of a particular object, or natural kind, as the reference of a given referring expression in use in a certain linguistic community, significant epistemic constraints of precisely the kind which my reading of Russell's Principle of Acquaintance, (A) above, demands. The sort of engagement between the

language-users and the particular object or kind in question which is required if this assignment is really to make best sense of what they say and do is precisely that involved in their acquiring knowledge about just that object, or that kind, and retaining this to some extent in memory, in the circumstances of their use of the expression. This is my principle (A): direct reference is possible only to objects and kinds about which a person has demonstratively-based knowledge. Put another way, the claim is that a person succeeds in singling out a determinate particular or kind in thought, in each of the wide variety of modes of reference by which this is possible, only in virtue of his standing in certain relations with that object or kind which provides him with demonstratively-based knowledge about it. These epistemic constraints upon reference are what, in McDowell's terms, anchor the correct semantic theory for a given language to actual facts of its use.

In the context of a certain attractive conception of the relation between the sense and reference of expressions referring to particular objects and natural kinds (see Frege, 1993), along the lines proposed by Evans (1982, pp. 20 ff; 1985b, esp. pp. 301 ff), this thesis provides a new way of articulating the idea that sense constitutes a 'mode of presentation' of reference. Evans' idea is that the sense of a given expression is to be elucidated, and distinguished from the sense of any other expression with the same reference, by giving an explanation of what it is that makes it the case that a person using the term in question is thinking determinately about the particular object or kind which serves as its reference rather than about any other thing, what it is about his thinking, therefore, which makes that object, or that kind, its concern. My present contention is that whatever the correct account here is, it must suffice for the subject's possession of demonstratively-based knowledge about that thing. Conjoining the two ideas leads to the suggestion that the sense of a referring expression is such that grasping it constitutes a capacity for the acquisition and retention of such knowledge about its reference. This, I think, gives substance to the metaphor of the sense of a referring expression as a mode of

presentation of its reference; and understanding a referring expression therefore involves acquaintance with its reference in just this sense.

What remains to be shown, then, is exactly how this basis for content externalism, in the Russellian thesis (A), undermines its purported incompatibility with any adequate account of self-knowledge.

Suppose that a person's belief that p comprises an externalist concept C. The putatively problematic inference would then be this.

- (e1) I believe that p.
- (e2) If x believes that p, then x's environment contains (or did contain) C.
- ∴ (e3) My environment contains (or did contain) C.

On my view, as I say, the externalist requirement upon possession of the concept C derives from the fact that its semantic value is necessarily a natural kind, say, about which any person who has the concept has demonstratively-based knowledge, where what this amounts to is either that he has knowledge expressible using demonstrative reference to that kind - e.g. 'that is water in the glass over there', or 'that water looks refreshing' - or that he had such knowledge, some of which is retained, perhaps linguistically categorized and no longer demonstratively expressible, in memory - e.g. 'cool water is refreshing to drink', or 'the water in Hinksey pool was very cold'. Now, if the inference set out above is to be an unwarrantedly non-empirical source of knowledge, then its premises must at least be true. The truth of (e1) depends upon the subject's grasp of the content 'p', though, which in turn depends upon his possession of the concept C. From (A), he therefore has demonstratively-based knowledge about C, along the lines suggested above. Hence he is already in a position to arrive at the knowledge that there is

(or was) C in his environment if only he turns his mind to the matter. Therefore this argument cannot possibly constitute a problematic non-empirical source of new empirical knowledge: if its premises are simply true, then the subject already has the wherewithal to arrive at knowledge of its conclusion.

Exactly the same applies, I contend, with respect to the following line of argument.

(e1) I believe that p.

(e2\*) If x believes that p, then x has (or has had) causal-perceptual relations with C.

∴ (e3\*) I have (or have had) causal-perceptual relations with C.

Possession of the demonstratively-based knowledge about C which is necessary for the truth of (e1) is itself sufficient for the subject unproblematically to arrive at knowledge of (e3\*). What is required for the possibility of (e1) already requires the obtaining of relations between the subject and C which provide a source of knowledge of (e3\*).

So far so good; but what about the following argument?

(e1) I believe that p.

(e2\*\*) If x believes that p, then x has demonstratively-based knowledge about C.

∴ (e3\*\*) I have demonstratively-based knowledge about C.

Again, I think that a structurally similar point applies. For the causal-perceptual relations between the subject and C which are required for the truth of (e1) are necessarily reason-giving for the subject. For otherwise they induce unacceptable distinctions in content

which are, from his point of view, without a difference. These reason-giving relations, then, are not merely sufficient for the subject's acquisition of demonstratively-based knowledge about C. They also put him in a position to recognize this knowledge as such. That is to say, the required encounters with C, in perception, or through the testimony of others, say, in making demonstratively-based knowledge available, themselves enable him to recognize his position as one of epistemic openness to C.<sup>7</sup>

Put slightly differently, the claim in each case is that the proponent of the relevant line of objection to externalism wrongly neglects the empirical-epistemic constraints upon concept possession which essentially enter into a person's knowledge of (e1) through their application simply to its truth. This already presupposes his standing in an epistemic relation - Russell's acquaintance, as it were - with samples of C. It is the first move in the objector's reasoning above, then, that any adequate account of a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs entails that this is wholly non-empirical, which is to be rejected. For this self-knowledge requires his grasp of the contents of the beliefs in question, his possession of whose component concepts in turn depends upon his empirical-epistemic relations with their semantic values. Thus, content externalism of this kind is perfectly compatible with an adequate account of a person's knowledge of the contents of his own beliefs.

The key idea behind this reconciliation, to repeat, is that determinate concept possession is an epistemic skill. It is a matter of a person's being in relations with the relevant worldly semantic values which provide him with demonstratively-based knowledge about such things. This is the source of the externalist requirements upon

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<sup>7</sup>This is how I think that the content externalist is able to register what is correct about epistemic internalism. It is clearly a contentious claim, though, of which a full defence is impossible here. See section IV below for a sketch, and my forthcoming book, esp. ch. 6, for the details.

concept possession. That is to say, the world-involving causal-perceptual relations between a person and certain things in the world around him which are essential to his possession of concepts with those things as their determinate semantic values are precisely the reason-giving content-determining relations which undermine the purported difficulty with which I began for combining content externalism with a plausible account of self-knowledge.

#### IV

Having avoided the problematic possibility of non-empirical knowledge of empirical matters of fact in this way, I should confess that, on my own account, the way in which the Russellian requirement (A) is met in the most basic cases yields a significant parallel between perceptual demonstrative knowledge and a priori knowledge on a certain traditional conception of the latter. This parallel, though, I contend, is perfectly harmless. I shall end by saying something which I hope may help to make this somewhat ironic outcome intelligible.<sup>8</sup>

Consider a case in which a person refers demonstratively to a particular mind-independent object on the basis of his perception of it. His successful reference to a persisting mind-independent thing depends upon more than there happening to be such a thing at the end of his pointing finger when he thinks ‘that is F’, say. He must have some appreciation of the fact that his thought is the joint upshot of the way that thing is and his meeting some further, independent enabling conditions upon recognizing this - being in the right place, looking in the right direction, with sufficient illumination and so on. For it is precisely his grasp of the possibility that these further, independent conditions might

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<sup>8</sup>What I say here will mainly be unargued assertion, meant as elucidation rather than proof. The details of the account are spelt out in my forthcoming book, where it is also defended at length against a number of pressing objections. See especially chs. 6 and 7.

fail to obtain which enables him to make sense of the possibility that that very thing might have been just as it is without his recognizing it; and this, in turn, is essential to his understanding of the demonstrative by which he identifies the relevant object as making reference to a mind-independent thing whose existence is quite independent of his awareness of it.

The subject's appreciation of this joint dependence then constitutes, in my view, his grasp of the particular perceptual demonstrative thought which he has - 'that is F' - as his openness to the way things objectively are in the world around him. Thus, his understanding of that thought, as the thought which it is about the way a particular mind-independent thing is, is sufficient for his appreciation of its revealing to him the way that thing is out there. Hence his grasp of the empirical content in question - that is F - is sufficient to provide him with an epistemic right to endorse that very content in belief. Although this right is defeasible, in the sense that he may take himself to have it in cases in which he has not - when, for some reason, an apparent episode of perceptual demonstrative thought is not a case of the facts being displayed to him in experience - it is nevertheless adequate to constitute certain perceptual demonstrative beliefs as knowledge in cases in which he has. Thus, as I shall explain, perceptual demonstrative knowledge meets at least a conception of a priori knowledge, although it absolutely does not meet another equally traditional conception of the a priori which is often not distinguished from the first.

The characterization of a priori knowledge is of course a highly controversial matter in itself, but one familiar idea is that contents are knowable a priori if, perhaps only in certain favourable circumstances and for appropriate subjects, understanding them is sufficient for knowledge of their truth. In this sense, certain perceptual demonstrative contents are on my view knowable a priori, or at least they are a priori



reasonable. For a person's grasp of their reference to mind-independent spatial particulars in his environment, essential to his understanding those contents as the contents which they are, provides him with a reason to endorse them in belief: they are presented to him as his epistemic access to the objective facts about such things. Having pointed up this analogy with the a priori, though, it is important to realize at the same time that such contents are about as far from being a priori as they possibly could be on another familiar conception of what this involves. For it is clearly false that their epistemic status is in any way independent of experience. Perceptual experiences are precisely what provide the subject's reasons for believing those contents. The initial oddity of this cross-categorization of such perceptual demonstrative beliefs by two perfectly familiar criteria of a priority is immediately resolved by recognizing that the perceptual experiences which provide reasons for them are essential to understanding them. This is how it is that a person's understanding of them can be sufficient for their positive epistemic status, even though this epistemic status is essentially experiential in source.<sup>9</sup>

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## EXTERNALISM AND A PRIORI KNOWLEDGE OF EMPIRICAL FACTS

BILL BREWER

- (E1) I believe that p.
- (E2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that p, then  $\underline{x}$ 's environmental embedding is thus-and-so.
- ∴ (E3) My environmental embedding is thus-and-so.

- (w1) I believe that water is wet.
- (w2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that water is wet, then  $\underline{x}$ 's environment contains (or did contain) water.
- ∴ (w3) My environment contains (or did contain) water.

Thus, the apparent incompatibility of content externalism with a plausible account of self-knowledge.

Solution: There is an essential empirical component in self-knowledge.  
For determinate concept possession is an epistemic skill.

### Alternatives

1. Content externalism is not committed to the a priori knowability of specific instances of (E2).
2. Knowledge of specific instances of (E3) cannot be acquired on the basis of any argument of this form.
3. There is no difficulty in the idea of wholly non-empirical knowledge of empirical matters of fact.
4. Self-ascriptions of beliefs are not, contrary to appearances, genuinely truth-evaluable statements.

Set 3 and 4 aside; consider and reject 1 and 2.

- (d1) I believe that that ball will go into the pocket.
- (d2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that that ball will go into the pocket, then  $\underline{x}$ 's environment contains that ball.
- ∴ (d3) My environment contains that ball.

(LP) Epistemic warrant cannot be transferred from A to B, even given an a priori known entailment from A to B, if the truth of proposition B is a precondition of the knower being able to believe the proposition A.

(M1)  $r_1$  and  $r_2$  are real numbers

(M2) The product of any two real numbers is a real number

∴ (M3)  $r_1 r_2$  is a real number

(A) A person's capacity to make determinate reference to certain objects and kinds in belief depends upon his having demonstratively-based knowledge about them.

This unifies the relations between a person, in his use of a given term, and a particular object or kind in the world around him, in virtue of which he understands that term as referring to that object or kind.

Thus: Sense  $\equiv$  epistemic mode of presentation of reference.

Grasp of sense  $\equiv$  epistemic acquaintance with reference.

(e1) I believe that p.

(e2) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that p, then  $\underline{x}$ 's environment contains (or did contain)  $\underline{C}$ .

∴ (e3) My environment contains (or did contain)  $\underline{C}$ .

(e1) I believe that p.

(e2\*) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that p, then  $\underline{x}$  has (or has had) causal-perceptual relations with  $\underline{C}$ .

∴ (e3\*) I have (or have had) causal-perceptual relations with  $\underline{C}$ .

(e1) I believe that p.

(e2\*\*) If  $\underline{x}$  believes that p, then  $\underline{x}$  has demonstratively-based knowledge about  $\underline{C}$ .

∴ (e3\*\*) I have demonstratively-based knowledge about  $\underline{C}$ .

Thus (A) resolves the prima facie tension between content externalism and self-knowledge.